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Some Contra Leaders Are Their Own Worst Enemies

By JAMES LeMOYNE

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — Less than a year after the Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua in 1979, 60 exiled officers of the defeated National Guard met in Guatemala. With little hope of success, some of them recall, they vowed to drive out the Sandinistas.

Today, more than 12,000 guerrillas are involved in the battle. Most of them march under the banner of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, which has received most of the \$80 million reportedly provided to insurgents by the Central Intelligence Agency. While their foot soldiers are mainly peasants angered by Sandinista policies, almost all the top commanders are former National Guard officers. Their influence and unclear political aims have become issues in the Congressional debate on continuing aid. Last week, vigorously supporting the guerrillas' struggle, President Reagan asserted that Congress must decide whether the United States would keep "trying to help people who had a Communist tyranny imposed on them by force, deception and fraud."

Originally trained by American Marines, the National Guard defended the ruling Somoza family for more than 40 years. By 1979 and the Sandinista-led revolution, many Nicaraguans identified the Guard with corruption and brutality. Now, as rebel leaders, some former guardsmen have proved capable. Others, however, have been accused of crimes including murder and stealing from the C.I.A. A rival guerrilla leader, Edén Pastora, refuses to join forces because, he says, the National Guardsmen could not win popular support at home.

Their supreme military commander, Col. Enrique Bermudez, was the Somoza Government's last military attaché in Washington where, a former associate says, he cemented ties to the C.I.A. At his base on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, new recruits drill awkwardly in ill-fitting boots. Colonel Bermudez said in an interview that he was fighting the "Sandinocommunist system," to create a pluralistic democracy. But rebel fighters appear to receive little political instruction and say their only goal is to destroy the Sandinistas in a war that Colonel Bermudez depicts as part of the struggle between Moscow and Washington. Critics argue that the National Guard officers' experience in defending the Somozas casts doubt on their commitments now. These officers, Colonel Bermudez replies, make up only 1 percent of the rebel army and have been unfairly stigmatized. "I don't think you can judge all by the sins of the few," he said.

Their numbers may be small, but their influence appears to be great. Under Colonel Bermudez, the heads of logistics, intelligence, training, operations, special forces and most of the largest combat units are Guard veterans. Many company commanders are former National Guard enlisted men. And two influential rebel civilian officials, Enrique and Aristides Sanchez, were large landowners who backed the Somozas.

After a rebel command shakeup in 1983, several former Guard officers departed under a cloud. Honduran military officials say they suspect Col. Ricardo Lau, until recently the head of rebel counterintelligence, of involvement in the disappearance or killing of at least 18 Hondurans and 80 Salvadoran leftists since 1981. According to Edgar Chamorro Coronel, who was dismissed as a civil-

ian director of the Nicaragua Democratic Force five months ago for publicly criticizing the rebels, other commanders threatened to kill Colonel Lau at a meeting in December 1983. The C.I.A. station chief was called in to mediate, Mr. Chamorro said. Mr. Lau could not be reached for comment. The C.I.A. has declined to comment on reports of its operations in Central America. Mr. Bermudez said he had heard many charges against Mr. Lau, once a close aide, but had seen no evidence to support them. Last week, Col. Roberto Santiváñez, a former director of intelligence in El Salvador, said he had seen documents indicating that Colonel Lau had "received payment of \$120,000 for arranging" the assassination in 1980 of El Salvador's Archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Colonel Santiváñez was dismissed as Salvadoran consul in New Orleans; some members of Congress and other Americans raised about \$35,000 for his expenses.

The rebel chief of staff, Emilio Echaverry, retired last year. He was accused of stealing large amounts of C.I.A. money, according to Mr. Chamorro and Capt. Armando Lopez, head of logistics. C.I.A. agents seeking the missing money forced several rebels to take lie detector tests, Mr. Chamorro said. A former National Guard ser-

geant who became a top combat commander, using the nom de guerre "Suicide," was executed in 1983 along with two other Guard alumni. Mr. Bermudez said they had "mistreated civilians." Another rebel official said they had been accused of robbery, rape and murder.

Worried about the guardsmen's reputation, the C.I.A. appointed a new seven-member National Directorate in late 1982, primarily to meet journalists and Congressmen, according to Mr. Chamorro and another senior rebel official. Colonel Bermudez and his aides continued to run the military, Mr. Chamorro added. "We used the Argentines, the C.I.A. and the Guard," he said. "How do you create a democratic army out of that?" Other rebel officials reply that National Guard officers have the same right to fight as any other Nicaraguan exile and that their military experience is needed. However, a

Western official said that at first, the former officers relied unsuccessfully on conventional military tactics, which they had learned as cadets. Now, threatened with the loss of American assistance, the Guard officers face the challenge of waging guerrilla war, which requires broad popular support. On present evidence, it is not clear if they can make the transition.